

Comments on Genesis 37

This chapter presents an unusual narrative where a favored son is despised by his other brothers. They scheme against him and he ends up being taken to a foreign land and sold into slavery. There are a number of obscurities in the text, which are treated in the summary below:

Joseph is a spoiled brat. He tattles on his brothers whenever he can (v. 2), and flaunts his father's preferential treatment of him in his brother's faces (v. 3). They get sick of him to the point they cannot even stand him anymore (v. 4). Joseph goes on and on about these dreams he has wherein he is superior to all of them, even bragging about them to his father (v. 5-10). His older brothers, who were sick of him already, are infuriated by the stories.

At one point when the rest of the brothers are far from home pasturing the flocks, Jacob sends Joseph out to check out how things are going so he can report back to him (v. 12-14). When his brothers see him coming their anger and frustration reaches a head and they plan to dispose of him by killing him and throwing him in a pit far out in the wilderness (v. 18-20). Reuben isn't quite as blinded by rage as are the others and he plans on a trick to preserve Joseph. Reuben suggest they just throw him into the pit in the wilderness and leave him there to die so they will not murder him themselves, all the while planning on rescuing him (v. 21-22). When Joseph shows up his brothers strip him of the tunic, which was a gift from their father, and drag him to the pit in the wilderness and throw him in it (v. 23-24). This pit was apparently a well during the wet season, or was for water storage and was abandoned, and was therefore deep enough to keep him from escaping (v. 24). Also, wherever the pit was, it was apparently far from Dothan where the brothers were camped with the flocks, for reasons we will see in a moment.

Returning back from the pit to the camp they sit down to eat and see off in the distance an Ishmaelite caravan traveling to Egypt (v. 25). Judah comes up with an idea to dispose of Joseph without killing him, they'll sell him to the caravan going to Egypt (v. 26-27).

However, while the brothers are away from the pit eating lunch and so forth, some Midianite traders just happen to pass by the pit and pull Joseph out of it (v. 28). So, Joseph was probably yelling for help and the passing Midianites heard him and had the same idea as did Judah, namely to sell him as a slave. Now, this pit Joseph was in must have been some distance from the brother's camp otherwise they would have spotted and stopped the Midianite traders from pulling him out of the pit. Also, the pit must have been far way or Reuben's ploy to free him

would have been in vain as he would not have been able to rescue him in their presence.

Meanwhile, the other brothers are eating lunch and so forth, Reuben sneaks off back to the pit to save Joseph only to discover that he is missing (v. 29). He does not know what has happened to Joseph so he laments his fate, probably fearing the worst (v. 30).

The brothers not knowing what happened to Joseph go ahead with the original plan and tell their father Jacob he was killed in the wilderness by a lion or something or other and all that is left is the bloody tunic (v. 31). They go ahead with the plan and inform Jacob and he greatly laments the apparent death of Joseph (v. 32-35).

Joseph ultimately ends up being sold as a servant to the house of Potiphar, the Pharaoh's chief steward (v. 36).

What is the point of the story? Is it merely intended to portray some historical events that puts Joseph's presence in Egypt into perspective? Perhaps. It probably has more to do with Divine engineering though. God is well aware of the bad feelings the brothers have towards Joseph, and its not like they aren't deserved. This being the case, and God knowing drought was imminent, He takes advantage of a bad situation to have Joseph placed in Egypt in circumstances that would cure his lousy attitude, as well as provide a means of saving the rest of the family when the drought hits. Thus, God is working to keep His covenant with Abraham by engineering events to serve His purposes.

Additionally, the events in this story give a case study for every family. Even though the family was not composed of a group of righteous zealots, God was still working with them in order to fulfil his covenant with Abraham. This example shows the efforts God will go to keep His covenants and to encourage people to become righteous and full of zeal.

1 AND Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. 2 These [are] the generations of Jacob. Joseph, [being] seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad [was] with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he [was] the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of [many] colours. 4 And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

v1-4 Jacob inherits the land of Canaan, the promised to his fathers (v. 1). Jacob's sons are shepherds. Jacob favors his son Joseph over his other sons. Jacob takes advantage of his

status to disparage his half-brothers born through the concubines Bilhah and Zilpah (v. 2). Jacob's favoritism of Joseph is plainly manifested in his giving him a rather ornate tunic, which none of the other brothers receive (v. 3). The other brothers are jealous and angry over their father's preferential treatment of Joseph, so much so they are filled with hatred for him and cannot even conduct themselves civilly with him (v. 4).

v2 "their evil report", in other words, Joseph returned deliberately unfavorable reports about his brothers to their father. Compare the "evil reports" of Num. 13:32 which were biased and inaccurate.

Also note Joseph appears to be particularly targeting the sons of the concubines, whereas he is the son of a fully legal wife. And not just that, he is the son of Jacob's first loved wife, Rachel. His arrogance over this point is exhibited in the dreams he has wherein only his mother is interpreted to be the moon and the other mothers are excluded (v. 9-10).

v3 "coat of many colors", the Jewish Publication Society translation renders this "an ornamented tunic" and their Torah Commentary on Genesis states:

The precise meaning of the Hebrew ketone passim remains unclear. In 2 Sam. 13:18-19 the garment mentioned as the distinctive dress of virgin daughters of royalty. Josephus describes it as "a long-sleeved tunic reaching to the ankle". In Aramaic and rabbinic Hebrew pas means the palm of the hand and the sole of the foot. Radak took passim to mean "striped". The Septuagint and Vulgate rendered the Hebrew "a robe of many colors".

Ancient Near Eastern art may shed some light on the subject. An Egyptian tomb painting at Beni-hasan from about 1890 B.C.E. features a Semitic clan with the men and women wearing multicolored tunics draped over one shoulder and reaching below the knees. Another Egyptian tomb has a representation of Syrian ambassadors bringing tribute to Tutankhamen. They are dressed in elaborately designed long robes wrapped around the body and over the shoulders. A mural fresco in the palace of King Zimri-lim at Mari, in southeastern Syria, shows figures dressed in garments made of many small rectangular panels of multicolored cloth. The discovery of a "pas garment" (lbs psm) in a list of various articles of clothing from the town of Ugarit, dated not earlier than the thirteenth century B.C.E., provides a parallel to the biblical phrase but

little clarification.

5 And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told [it] his brethren: and they hated him yet the more. 6 And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: 7 For, behold, we [were] binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. 8 And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. 9 And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. 10 And he told [it] to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, what [is] this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? 11 And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.

v5-11 Joseph has dreams wherein he sees himself as the patriarch and leader of the family, even his father will bow to him (v. 5-7, 9). He tells his family about the dreams and his brothers are enraged by it (v. 8), and even his father reprimands him for speaking such things (v. 10). While his brother are jealous and angry over the visions, Jacob gives them careful consideration (v. 11).

v10 "his father rebuked him", the reader is informed in v. 11 that Jacob observed the saying, or he heard it and considered it's meaning. The rebuke must therefore be for something besides the content of the dream itself. Jacob is probably censuring his son for being so arrogant as to share this dream with his brothers. The visions are given to Joseph, and what does he do with them? He tells his brothers and father they will all bow down to him. His focus at present is solely upon himself.

"thy mother", Joseph's dream is of a sun, moon, and eleven stars. The dream is interpreted to have the sun being Jacob, the eleven stars as his brothers and the moon as his own mother. What of Jacob's other wives, the mothers of his brothers? In the interpretation of the dream, Joseph fails to present the moon as the wives of Jacob and instead presents it as only his mother.

12 And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. 13 And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed [the flock] in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here [am I]. 14 And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the

flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. 15 And a certain man found him, and, behold, [he was] wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, what seekest thou? 16 And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed [their flocks]. 17 And the man said, They are departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan. 18 And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. 19 And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. 20 Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams. 21 And Reuben heard [it], and he delivered him out of their hands; and said, Let us not kill him. 22 And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, [but] cast him into this pit that [is] in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again.

v12-22 The older brothers are away from home tending the flocks and Jacob sends Joseph to check up on them (v. 12-17). When they see him coming they conspire to kill him (18-20). One of the brothers seeks to thwart the murder of his brother by persuading them against such an evil act (v. 21). Rather, he plots to deliver him from his brothers (v. 22).

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, [his] coat of [many] colours that [was] on him; 24 And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit [was] empty, [there was] no water in it. 25 And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry [it] down to Egypt. 26 And Judah said unto his brethren, what profit [is it] if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? 27 Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he [is] our brother [and] our flesh. And his brethren were content. 28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty [pieces] of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. 29 And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph [was] not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. 30 And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child [is] not; and I, whither shall I go?

v23-30 When Joseph arrives they strip him of his beloved tunic and throw him into a pit so he cannot escape (v. 23-24). They notice a band of Ishmaelite traders passing in the distance and decide to sell Joseph into slavery rather than leave him to die (v. 25-27). But, in the mean time, a group of Midianites had

passed by a found Joseph in the pit, and they pull him out sell him into slavery to the Ishmaelites who ultimately take him to Egypt (v. 28). When Reuben sneaks to the pit to free Joseph, he discovers he is already gone and is terribly upset about it, fearing the worst (v. 29). He returns to his brothers and tells them Joseph is gone (v. 30).

31 And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; 32 And they sent the coat of [many] colours, and they brought [it] to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it [be] thy son's coat or no. 33 And he knew it, and said, [It is] my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. 34 And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.

v31-36 The brothers genuinely don't know where Joseph is anymore, and they assume he is dead (cf. 44:20) so they follow through on their original plan and manufacture evidence of Joseph's being killed by lion and show it to their father (v. 31-32). Joseph is terribly grieved at the apparent loss of his favorite son and mourns him (v. 33-34). His grief is so terrible none of the family can console him (v. 35), and he even wishes he was dead so he could be with Joseph (v. 36).

36 And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, [and] captain of the guard.

v36 While the family believes Joseph is dead, he is in fact sold into slavery in Egypt at the house of Pharaoh's captain of the guard.

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